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Psalm 138:2 Translation Justification

Philological and Grammatical Analysis of Psalm 138:2: Evaluating the Linguistic Validity of a Modern Idiomatic Translation

The final colon of Psalm 138:2 presents one of the most celebrated and debated translation challenges in the Hebrew Psalter.[1, 2, 3] The Masoretic Text reads:) כִּי־הִגְדַּלְתָּ עַל־כָּל־שִׁמְךָ אִמְרָתֶךָ [6 ,5 ,4].($kî$-$higdaltā$ $ʿal$-kol-$šimkā$ $ʾimrātēkā$ Historically, literal translations have struggled to convey this clause clearly, often resulting in renderings such as the King James Version's "for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name".[7, 8] Such translations introduce significant grammatical and theological tension, as exalting a "word" above the divine "name"—which represents the very essence, presence, and sovereign authority of God—seems to create an unnatural hierarchy within the divine attributes.[3, 9, 10]

To resolve this syntactic and conceptual difficulty, some modern versions resort to conjectural emendations of the Hebrew text.[4, 7, 11] However, a rigorous philological analysis demonstrates that the text is entirely coherent as preserved in the Masoretic tradition.[7] The proposed translation—"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation"—is not only linguistically sound, but it also reflects a precise understanding of the semantic range of the constituents, the mechanics of Biblical Hebrew prepositions, the orthographic evidence from ancient manuscripts, and the cultural context of the Ancient Near East.[2, 12]

Textual Witnesses and Ancient Manuscripts

The textual integrity of the phrase is verified by comparing the Masoretic Text with ancient manuscript discoveries, which reveals that the difficulties are interpretive rather than scribal.[2, 4] The discovery of the Great Psalms Scroll (11QPsa) at Qumran provides a critical Hebrew witness to this verse that predates the Masoretic pointing by nearly a millennium.[4, 13] The Dead Sea Scrolls text reads: [4].($kî$ $higdaltāh$ $ʿal$ $kôl$ $šimkəkā$ $ʾimrātəkā$) כי הגדלתה על כול שמכה אמרתכה

This Qumran rendering is orthographically more complete (using *scriptio plena* for כול and long suffix forms like הגדלתה, שמכה, and אמרתכה), but it is functionally identical to the consonantal Masoretic Text.[4] This ancient correspondence confirms that the three core nouns and verbs—*g-d-l*, *š-m*, and *ʾ-m-r*—were firmly established in the Hebrew text during the Second Temple period, making scribal error highly unlikely.[4, 7]

By contrast, the Septuagint (LXX) translates the colon as: ὅτι ἐμεγάλυνας ἐπὶ πᾶν ὄνομα τὸ ἅγιόν σου (*hoti emegalunas epi pan onoma to hagion sou*), which translates to "because You have magnified Your holy name over all".[4, 8, 11] The Greek translators apparently omitted the final noun *ʾimrâ* ("word") or had a Hebrew exemplar that lacked it, perhaps due to the difficulty of translating the two consecutive nouns in construct.[4]

Modern conjectural emendations, such as Daniel Wallace's NET Bible translation, "for you have exalted your promise above the entire sky," assume that a copyist left out a *yod* and read שָׁמֶיךָ (*šāmeykā*, "your heavens") instead of שִׁמְךָ (*šimkā*, "your name").[4, 7, 11] Given the absolute agreement between 11QPsa and the Masoretic Text, such emendations are unnecessary.[4, 7] The textual tradition is remarkably stable, meaning the translation problem must be resolved through grammatical and semantic analysis of the preserved Hebrew words.[4, 7]

Lexical Analysis of the Nominal and Verbal Components

A precise translation relies on understanding the semantic boundaries of each Hebrew term.[2] This section evaluates the verb *gādal* and the nouns *ʾimrâ* and *šēm* to justify their rendering in the proposed translation.[1, 2]

The Verbal Root *Gādal* in the Hiphil Stem (*Higdaltā*)

The verb הִגְדַּלְתָּ (*higdaltā*) is the second-person masculine singular Hiphil perfect of the root גָּדַל (*gādal*), meaning "to be great".[1, 2, 11] In the causative Hiphil stem, it carries the active sense of "to make great," "to magnify," or "to exalt".[1, 2] While older translations favor the Latinate "magnified," this word can be semantically misleading to modern readers by evoking the physical enlargement of an object, as through a magnifying lens.[2]

In the context of ancient Northwest Semitic literature, making a word or decree "great" signifies exalting its status, demonstrating its validity, or carrying it out in a magnificent, public manner.[1, 2] Thus, translating *higdaltā* as "you have made great" preserves the causative force of the Hiphil stem while avoiding the archaic or misleading connotations of "magnified".[2]

The Semantic Range of *ʾimrâ* as "Promise" or "Solemn Decree"

The noun אִמְרָתֶךָ (*ʾimrātēkā*) consists of the feminine noun אִמְרָה (*ʾimrâ*) combined with the second-person singular pronominal suffix (*-kā*).[5, 14, 15, 16] Derived from the verbal root אָמַר (*ʾāmar*, "to speak"), the primary meaning of *ʾimrâ* is "utterance," "speech," or "word".[11, 14, 15, 17] However, its

usage in poetic Biblical Hebrew—where it occurs 37 times, heavily concentrated in the Psalter—indicates a specialized semantic range.[15, 16, 17]

Unlike the more generic term דָּבָר (*dābār*), which can mean "word," "matter," "thing," or "event," *ʾimrâ* is predominantly used in poetic registers to denote a solemn, highly specific divine utterance, covenant commitment, or "promise".[2, 3, 18, 19, 20] This is particularly evident in passages where the *ʾimrâ* of Yahweh is tested, refined, and proven true in times of distress.[20]

For example, in Psalm 18:30 (MT 18:31), King David declares that "the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him".[20] Here, the parallel structure equates the *ʾimrâ* of the Lord with a reliable shield, illustrating its functional identity as a binding covenant promise.[20] Therefore, rendering *ʾimrātēkā* as "your promise" in Psalm 138:2 is contextually and lexicographically precise, aligning with the messianic and covenantal undertones of the Davidic collection.[2, 12, 21, 22]

The Concept of *Šēm* as "Reputation" or "Renown" in Semitic Culture

The noun שִׁמְךָ (*šimkā*) consists of שֵׁם (*šēm*, "name") with the second-person singular suffix.[23, 24, 25] In modern Western societies, a name is primarily an arbitrary label of identity. In the Ancient Near East, however, a name (*šēm*) was functionally equivalent to a person's character, essence, authority, and public "reputation".[1, 2, 3, 25]

The Hebrew Bible routinely utilizes *šēm* in contexts where "fame," "renown," or "reputation" is the intended meaning.[23, 24, 25] For example, in Genesis 12:2, Yahweh promises to "make your name (*šēm*) great," which does not mean changing Abram's identity, but rather exalting his historical renown and reputation.[25] Similarly, in Jeremiah 33:2, Yahweh's name is invoked to embody His covenant character and active reputation in history.[25]

In the setting of Psalm 138, David is offering public thanksgiving before the "gods" and earthly rulers, celebrating God's acts of salvation.[21, 26, 27, 28] In this public and royal sphere, the primary concern is the public demonstration of God's character.[8, 21] Stating that God has acted in accordance with His *šēm* is an assertion that His actions correspond perfectly to His established "reputation" for steadfast love (*ḥesed*) and faithfulness (*ʾemet*).[2, 3, 8] Rendering *šimkā* as "your reputation" accurately captures this socio-linguistic reality.[2, 12]

Prepositional Syntax and the Functional Range of *Al*

The grammatical core of the translation difficulty lies in the relationship established by the preposition עַל (*ʿal*) and the quantifier כֹּל (*kol*).[1, 2, 7] Understanding how these particles function in construct with a definite singular noun is vital to evaluating the proposed translation.[29, 30]

The Preposition *Al* as "According to" or "In Keeping With"

While the primary, spatial meaning of the preposition עַל (*ʿal*) is "upon," "over," or "above," its semantic range in Biblical Hebrew is highly diverse.[7, 31, 32, 33] Standard lexicons, such as Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) and the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), note that *ʿal* regularly expresses logical and normative relationships, functioning as "according to," "on the basis of," "consistent with," or "in keeping with".[1, 2, 10, 33, 34]

This normative usage is well-attested in the Hebrew Bible [33, 34, 35]:

- In Psalm 18:20 (MT 18:21), the preposition *ʿal* is used in parallel with the comparative prefix *kə-* to express action in conformity with a standard: "The Lord has rewarded me **according to** (*kə-*) my righteousness; **according to** (*ʿal-*) the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me".[35]
- In Daniel 9:16, the Aramaic cognate preposition *ʿal* is used in an identical normative sense: "O Lord, **in keeping with** (*ʿal*) all Your righteous acts, let Your anger and wrath turn away".[31]
- The common compound idiom עַל־פִּי (*ʿal-pî*), literally meaning "upon the mouth of," is the standard Hebrew expression for "according to" or "by the command of".[32]

The musical instructions in the psalm inscriptions further confirm this normative usage.[36] Several psalms are prefaced with instructions featuring the preposition *ʿal*, such as *ʿal-hagitith* (Psalm 8, 81, 84), which scholars interpret as an instruction to perform the psalm "according to" or "set to" the Githitic tune or instrument.[36] This idiomatic usage highlights how *ʿal* functions as a comparative standard in liturgical contexts.[36]

Translating *ʿal* as "above" in Psalm 138:2 forces an interpretive problem where God's word is elevated *over* His name.[1, 7, 10] By contrast, translating *ʿal* as "according to" or "in keeping with" matches its established normative semantic range.[1, 2, 10] This rendering demonstrates that God's physical intervention to fulfill His word is perfectly consistent with His divine name and character.[2, 3, 10]

The Quantifier *Kol* and the Definite Singular Construct

The word כֹּל (*kol*) functions as a noun or determiner meaning "all," "every," "whole," or "entirety".[29, 33, 34] According to standard Hebrew syntax, the precise meaning of *kol* is determined by the definiteness and number of the noun it modifies [29]:

1. When followed by an *indefinite singular* noun, *kol* means "every".[29]
2. When followed by a *definite plural* or collective noun, *kol* means "all".[29]
3. When followed by a *definite singular* noun, *kol* means "the whole of" or "the entirety of".[29]

In the phrase עַל־כָּל־שִׁמְךָ (*ʿal-kol-šimkā*), the noun שֵׁם (*šēm*) is singular and is made grammatically definite by the attached second-person pronominal suffix (*-kā*).[5, 30] Therefore, syntactically, *kol-šimkā* must be translated as "your entire name" or "the entirety of your reputation".[29] Translating it simply as "all your name" is grammatically imprecise, as "name" is singular.[4, 7] The proposed rendering—"your entire reputation"—is an accurate English expression of this definite singular construct.[2, 29]

Translation History and Comparative Modern Renderings

The history of English Bible translation reveals a long-standing tension between literal syntactic reproduction and dynamic semantic clarity.[7] The table below displays how key versions have navigated the grammatical components of Psalm 138:2c, illustrating the lineage that supports the proposed idiomatic rendering.[2, 12]

Bible Version / Witness	Translation of Psalm 138:2c	Treatment of Preposition (*ál*)	Translation of *kol-šimkā*	Translation of *ʾimrātēkā*	Linguistic / Exegetical Coherence
LXX (137:2) [4]	"because You have magnified Your holy name over all" [4]	ἐπὶ (*epi*) – "over/above" [4]	πᾶν ὄνομα (*pan onoma*) – "every name" [4]	*Omitted* or consolidated [4]	Avoids the double noun construct by omitting "word".[4]
Wycliffe (1395) [7]	"for thou hast magnefied thin hooli name aboue al thing" [7]	"aboue" – spatial literalism [7]	"thin hooli name... al thing" [7]	*Omitted* [7]	Follows the Septuagint's omission of the word *ʾimrâ*.[4, 7]
Coverdale (1535) [37]	"for thou hast magnified thy worde, acordynge vnto thy greate name" [37]	"acordynge vnto" – normative [37]	"thy greate name" – dynamic [37]	"thy worde" – standard [37]	Earliest English version to correctly recognize the normative use of *ál*.[7, 37]
Geneva Bible (1560) [5]	"for thou hast magnified thy Name above all things by thy worde" [5]	"above" – spatial literalism [5]	"thy Name above all things" [5]	"by thy worde" – instrumental [5]	Rearranges syntax to make "word" the instrument of exalting the "name".[5]
KJV (1611) [7]	"for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" [7]	"above" – spatial literalism [7]	"all thy name" – ungrammatical singular [7]	"thy word" – standard [7]	Extremely literal; creates theological tension by ranking word above name.[3, 10]
NASB (1995) [1]	"For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name" [1]	"according to" – normative [1]	"all Your name" – literal [1]	"Your word" – standard [1]	Grammatically sound on *ál*, but retains literal "all Your name".[1, 2]

Bible Version / Witness	Translation of Psalm 138:2c	Treatment of Preposition (*ʿal*)	Translation of *kol-šimkā*	Translation of *ʾimrātēkā*	Linguistic / Exegetical Coherence
NIV (2011) [27]	"for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame" [27]	"surpasses" – dynamic verb [27]	"your fame" – dynamic for *šēm* [27]	"solemn decree" – context-specific [27]	Excellent semantic clarity, though free in its verbal rearrangement.[8, 27]
NET Bible (2005) [7]	"for you have exalted your promise above the entire sky" [7]	"above" – spatial literalism [7]	"the entire sky" – conjectural [7]	"your promise" – dynamic [7]	Relies on an unnecessary scribal emendation from "name" to "heavens".[4, 7]
NJB (1985) [12]	"your promises surpass even your fame" [12]	"surpass" – comparative [12]	"your fame" – dynamic for *šēm* [12]	"your promises" – dynamic [12]	Strongly aligns with the proposed translation's semantic insights.[2, 12]
Proposed Translation	"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation"	"in keeping with" – normative [2]	"your entire reputation" – totalized singular [2]	"your promise" – poetic specific [2]	Syntactically exact and contextually coherent without emendation.[2, 12]

Exegetical Coherence within the Davidic Psalter

Evaluating a translation requires testing its coherence within the immediate and broader contexts of the psalm.[21] Psalm 138 is a song of thanksgiving, historically attributed to David, celebrating an immediate answer to prayer and subsequent deliverance.[21, 28]

Immediate Context and the Demonstration of Covenant Love

The psalmist declares: "On the day I called, You answered me; You made me bold with strength in my soul".[19, 28, 38] This immediate deliverance serves as a tangible verification of God's spoken promises.[3, 7] When the psalmist states, *kî-higdaltā ʿal-kol-šimkā ʾimrātēkā*, he is expressing his awe that God's actions have validated His word.[1, 7]

The immediate context focuses on the pairing of "steadfast love" (*ḥesed*) and "faithfulness" (*ʾemet*) in verse 2b, which are the primary attributes associated with the divine covenant name Yahweh.[3, 8] To

say that God has made His promise great *in keeping with* His entire reputation means that His active historical rescue corresponds to His covenant character.[2, 10]

Literary Context and the Structure of the Final Davidic Psalter

In the wider context of the Psalter, Psalm 138 serves as the introduction to the final Davidic collection (Psalms 138–143).[21] This collection contains several individual laments marked by intense distress, persecution, and pleas for deliverance (such as Psalms 140–143).[21, 38, 39]

By placing Psalm 138 at the head of this collection, the editors of the Psalter establish a theological foundation of gratitude and trust.[21] The assertion that God acts in keeping with His entire reputation assures the reader that even in the midst of the deep afflictions described in the subsequent laments, God's covenant promises remain unbroken.[21] This thematic framework is resolved in the final collection of praise psalms (Psalms 146–150) that conclude the Psalter.[21]

The Sanctuary and the Concept of the Temple (*Hêkāl*)

In verse 2a, the psalmist declares: "I will bow down toward Your holy temple".[19, 27, 28] Critics sometimes argue that the mention of the "temple" (*hêkāl*) is an anachronism for a Davidic psalm, since the permanent temple was built by David's son, Solomon.[22, 28]

However, in Biblical Hebrew, the term *hêkāl* (derived from the Akkadian *ekallu*, "great house") simply refers to a sacred palace or sanctuary.[28] In the historical books, it is used to designate the tabernacle in Shiloh long before the construction of Solomon's temple, as seen in 1 Samuel 1:9, 1:24, and 3:3.[27, 40]

The term *hêkāl* can refer to any designated sanctuary where God's presence dwells, or it can be used prophetically.[22, 26, 28] Whether the psalmist is bowing toward the physical tabernacle in Jerusalem or looking forward to the future temple, the act of bowing toward the sanctuary symbolizes submission to God's supreme authority.[21, 26, 28]

Theological Coherence: Resolving Divine Self-Contradiction

The traditional translation—"You have magnified Your word above all Your name"—presents a conceptual problem.[3, 7, 10] In Hebrew thought, the "name" (*šēm*) is the supreme revelation of the divine character, representing God's very person.[3] To suggest that God exalts His "word" *above* His "name" implies that His spoken declarations can somehow outrank, supersede, or exist independently of His character.[3, 10]

In contrast, the translation "For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation" avoids this division.[2, 10] It posits that God's actions are in perfect alignment with His character.[3, 10] The greatness of His performed promise (*ʾimrâ*) matches the full measure of His revealed reputation (*šēm*).[1, 2, 10] God does not act *above* His character; rather, His covenant performance is the perfect reflection of who He has revealed Himself to be.[3, 10]

This translation also highlights a sharp contrast between Yahweh and the kings of the ancient world.[2, 41] In Ancient Near Eastern cultures, pagan deities and earthly rulers were often viewed as capricious, arbitrary, and untrustworthy.[2, 41] Rulers regularly used their sovereign power and majestic reputation (*šēm*) to break their covenants and promises (*ʾimrâ*) when it was politically advantageous.[2]

Yahweh, however, is presented as uniquely righteous.[2] By making His promise great *in keeping with* His entire reputation, Yahweh restricts His actions to His own rules.[2] He binds Himself to His spoken word, ensuring that His covenant actions never contradict His holy character.[2, 7]

Conclusion

The rendering of Psalm 138:2 as "For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation" stands as a highly accurate, linguistically sound translation.[1, 2] By examining the grammatical features of the Hebrew text, this study demonstrates that:

1. The translation of *ʾimrātēkā* as "your promise" is justified by the poetic, covenantal usage of the noun *ʾimrâ* in the Psalter.[2, 20]
2. The rendering of *šimkā* as "reputation" reflects the cultural and sociological function of a "name" (*šēm*) in the ancient Semitic world.[2, 3, 25]
3. Translating the preposition *ʿal* as "in keeping with" matches its established normative semantic range ("according to," "consistent with") and avoids the unnatural theological hierarchy created by translating it as "above".[1, 2, 10, 34]
4. The translation of *kol-šimkā* as "your entire reputation" respects the syntactic rules of the totalizing quantifier *kol* when placed before a definite singular noun.[29]

This translation resolves a historic textual challenge without altering the original Hebrew text.[7] It preserves the integrity of the Masoretic Text while delivering a clear, contextually accurate translation that remains faithful to both the language and the theology of the Psalmist.[2, 3]